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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000573

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BOMBINGS: REGIME REACTION SURREAL BUT PREDICTABLE

REF: RANGOON 550 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: The Burmese regime is treating the shocking May 7 triple bombings as a non-event; there are few signs of enhanced security and control of information has been heavy-handed. Over 90 wounded victims remain hospitalized and the death toll has reportedly approached 30 persons, although the GOB has not altered its official figure of only 11 dead. Authorities have not offered evidence to bolster immediate accusations of responsibility and a post-bombing inquiry appears to be more political than investigatory. The GOB's predictable, though surreal, response to the terrorism has fueled the leading local theory that the regime itself was involved. We expect that an eventual staged "press conference," replete with evidence and culprits, will break the silence, but the GOB will have difficulty convincing the populace that such findings approximate the truth. End Summary.

WHAT BOMBINGS?

2. (U) Burma's military regime is treating the shocking May 7 triple bombings as a non-event. The GOB, subsequent to immediate reports on May 7 and 8, has ignored the entire crisis. Several vague official editorials throughout the week have alerted the citizenry to be cautious for similar acts of "destructive elements." However, the print and broadcast media have focused almost exclusively on traditional coverage of bridge building, diatribes against ethnic insurgents, and negative developments in the Iraq war.

3. (SBU) Although security forces are reportedly on high-alert, there are no visible signs that the GOB has changed its overall security posture. Key government offices and military installations, including Rangoon's international airport, have not increased security beyond a routine, mostly symbolic presence and i.d. checking; and access procedures at most public locations are minimal or nonexistent, except at many private businesses and some shopping venues where bag checks have been introduced.

CIRCLE THE WAGONS

4. (SBU) The GOB's control on information has been typically heavy-handed. Authorities have maintained a very tight seal at hospitals and have reportedly refused to release bodies to families, prohibited transfer of patients to private clinics, and detained visitors who ask too many questions or individuals (including hospital staff and monks at monastic crematories) who offer information to journalists or families. According to sources, over 90 seriously wounded victims remain hospitalized and the total death toll has approached 30 persons, although the GOB has refused to alter its official figure of only 11 dead.

5. (U) The long-term economic repercussions of the triple bombings are uncertain, but the immediate impact is significant: hotel room and event bookings are evaporating; a jittery local population is avoiding major shopping centers and grocery stores (a boon to local, family-owned shops); and market traffic, already affected by an April bombing in Mandalay, is in decline. Nonetheless, major business operators report that border trade has been mostly unaffected and the black market value of the Burmese kyat has remained stable throughout the week.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

6. (C) The GOB has not publicly offered a shred of evidence to bolster its immediate accusation that ethnic insurgent and exile activists were responsible. A post-bombing inquiry appears to be focused on the political dimensions of the event and by all accounts does not involve crime-scene investigations or forensics. Authorities quickly undertook a cleanup operation at the bombing sites, although co-located businesses remain shuttered.

7. (C) Special Branch (SB) police officers have in recent days rounded up a number of local ethnic Karen residents for intense questioning and on May 8 the Police Director General convoked and questioned eight recently released democracy activists (including 1988 student leaders Min Ko Naing and Ko

Ko Gyi). The activists denied any involvement and reportedly criticized the GOB for providing full security to top regime leaders while leaving vulnerable the general population.

KEYSTONE COPS

18. (C) A senior MFA official, who characterized the bombings as "a true act of terrorism," asked Emboff on May 10 if the USG had any information on the bombings; however, the official said the GOB has not requested assistance from any foreign source and "does not plan to do so." The same official stated, without offering any evidence, that the likely perpetrators were individuals or groups residing in the Thai border areas, "specifically 'God's Army,' the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF), and the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) headed by (cousin of ASSK) Sein Win."

19. (C) The GOB has been thoroughly unresponsive to the diplomatic community. Although at least five foreigners were among the injured, an MFA Director General told the dean of the diplomatic corps (Philippines Ambassador) that "there were no foreign casualties." One Ambassador was told that foreigners are not the MFA's responsibility, but that of the Home Affairs Ministry. However, the MFA DG advised the dean not to contact Home Affairs, "because they may not be able to answer diplomats and, besides, there is a language problem." This Keystone Cops routine takes on a further dimension given that the Minister of Home Affairs told the COM in the wake of the December tsunami that all diplomats must direct crisis-related inquiries to the GOB via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

COMMENT: SILENCE UNTENABLE, BUT STAGED EVENT PREDICTABLE

110. (C) The GOB's predictable, though surreal, response to the country's worse act of terrorism in modern history--a nearly complete news blackout and apparent disregard for the considerable human suffering of the victims and the general population--has simply fueled the most popular local theory that the regime itself was directly involved. Although the bombings could conceivably remain a complete mystery, we don't expect the silence to persist too much longer. In keeping with past practice, the regime is likely in the near future to stage a "press conference" replete with "evidence" and culprits. However, they'll have a difficult time convincing a highly skeptical populace that such findings approximate the truth. End Comment.
Martinez